

The Church Musician as Steward of the Mysteries

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It hardly comes as a surprise to most that in the midst of the confusion generated, on the one hand, by proponents of a rigid repristination of worship practices or, on the other hand, by the downright liturgical silliness perpetuated by those determined to “sell” religion in the worst possible way, there is equal confusion as to the role of the musician in the life and worship of the church. Proponents on either side of this great divide have radically different understandings of the role of music in the church. And if there is little agreement on the role of music in the life and worship of the church, it is hardly surprising that there should be so little agreement as to the role of the church musician.

Congregations are ambivalent as to what the church musician’s role is or should be. Pastors—who are having their own identity problems—are not often too helpful. Schools that train church musicians are criticized for not producing the kind of musicians the church “needs,” although any distinction between needs and wants seems to be irrelevant. And most of all, church musicians themselves find they are betwixt and between a variety of conflicting ideas and demands as to what they should be about.

Requests from parishes seeking church musicians, conversations with church committees wrestling with job descriptions for “directors of celebration,” and visits with congregations trying to cope with the perennial problem of finding competent choir directors and organists all suggest that the confusion is widespread. Many pastors and congregations are adamant that the head of the list must be “flexibility.” It is hardly surprising that under such circumstances there is confusion and frustration, and, on the part of many conscientious musicians who see service in the church as part of this calling, a simple concern for survival.

Paraphrasing Humphrey Appleby from another context, it is axiomatic that for church musicians simply to survive in many parishes, “hornets nests should be left unstirred, cans of worms should remain unopened. . . boats (should remain) unrocked, nettles ungrasped, (one should) refrain from taking bulls by the horns, and (one must) resolutely turn (one’s) back to the music.”¹ Nor does one have to be completely cynical about the state of interpersonal relationships between many pastors and church musicians to resonate with the advice given by one battle-scarred church musician who suggested: “If you are not happy with a minister’s decision, there is no need to argue him out of it. Accept it warmly, and then suggest that he leave it to you to work out the details.”

What role should the church musician play in the life of the church today? What god is he or she to serve? Is it the god of religious individualism, of congregational pragmatism, of musical dilettantism, or the god of

religion as fun and games? What exactly is the role that the church musician is called upon to fill in a time when, as Martin Marty has remarked, those “who know least about the faith (seem to want to) determine the most about its expression.²

That the various answers to this question as they play themselves out in parishes and congregations have given rise to confusion and conflict in many places is a fact of contemporary church life. This is true whether the church musician’s title is choir director, organist, minister of music, pastoral musician, director of celebration ministries, cantor, or hired hand. It remains true that, regardless of one’s title, how one understands—and how one’s pastor and congregation understand—what one is about as a church musician often plays a more significant part than any other factor in shaping one’s understanding or misunderstanding of one’s role. Some titles may direct that understanding in more fruitful paths; others may lead down ways that would best be avoided.

Among the welter of titles, let me suggest another, one with biblical overtones. It is that of steward. The author of the First Epistle of Peter says it this way: “As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace. . . in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 4:10-11) My *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* suggests that a steward is “one called to exercise responsible care over possessions entrusted to him.” Perhaps a little exegesis, or at least a gloss or two, might help here.

Called: Whatever the bureaucratic machinery is naming them these days, the work of the church musician is a “calling,” a ministry. To be a latter-day psalmist—a leader of the people’s song, a steward of the mysteries, standing in the succession of Heman, Asaph, Ethan, Azariah, Chenaniah, and all the Levites mentioned in 1 Chronicles 15—is a calling worthy of our best efforts.

Responsible care: To be responsible implies that we are able to be trusted and depended upon, that we are personally accountable—accountable, that is, first to the one who has given us this great gift of music. Such “responsible care” includes both the conservation and the development of the gift. The church musician preserves the gift of the church’s musical heritage and at the same time moves it forward. Many present-day problems that church musicians encounter may be found exactly at this juncture. Where the emphasis is rather exclusively on one or the other of these—either on an exclusive preoccupation with preservation or repristination, or, on the other hand, with a self-serving preoccupation with the present or movement toward the future apart from one’s heritage—problems are sure to erupt.

Over possessions entrusted: Of all the gifts given to the Church, music should, according to Luther, be given the highest place next to theology. “. . . music is an endowment and gift of God, not a gift of men. . . . I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise.³ Music is a great gift given to the Church for the praise of God and the proclamation of his Word to the world. As a gift entrusted to our care, we are called to use it with

care and with responsibility. Responsible care certainly includes a knowledge of the art of this great gift. As the author of I Chronicles reminds us, Chenaniah, leader of the Levites in music, was appointed to direct the music, "for he understood it."⁴

How does all this work its way out in the daily calling of the church musician? How is one a careful and responsible steward in the course of one's daily work as a parish church musician? Let me make four tentative suggestions for the church musician as responsible steward of the mysteries.

As a church musician, one is a responsible steward of the mysteries when one understands that the Church—before it is anything else—is a worshiping community. We begin with what should be rather self-evident. The church is first of all a community of the faithful gathered about Word and Sacrament to receive strength and nourishment for its life together and for the sake of the world. But in many parishes worship is a peripheral—or at best, penultimate—activity, as the priorities of time, talent, and energy are given over to a host of important, but secondary, matters. Too many parishes with sanctuaries now designated as "Worship Centers" are, in reality, centered in activities other than worship. One may argue about the priorities of the tasks of the Church has been given to do—education, mission, evangelism, stewardship—but about what the Church is, first and foremost, there should be no argument. It is a worshiping community gathered around Word and Sacrament.

In that worshiping community music plays an important part in its corporate proclamation and praise. And at the center of its music-making stands the church musician, the latter-day psalmist who nurtures and carries forward the church's musical tradition. Church musicians are faithful and responsible stewards as they teach, encourage, nurture, and help congregations—sometimes even recalcitrant congregations—to a fuller, richer, and deeper celebration and understanding of the faith. The joining of music with Christian worship was hardly the result of historical concern for the faith, joined together with an understanding of the power of music to move our minds and hearts. In theory, the wedding of music and worship appears to be a wedding of convenience; in practice it is the unavoidable result of the new life in Christ. In theory it may be possible to imagine Christian worship devoid of song; in practice the Christian community fills its gatherings with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. As Luther once remarked, "God has cheered our hearts and minds through His dear Son. . . He who believes this earnestly cannot be quiet about it. But he *must* gladly and willingly sing. . . (emphasis mine).⁵ The history of the worshiping Christian community is the history of a singing and music-making community. We cannot imagine it otherwise.

The church musician is a responsible steward of the mysteries when she understands that music in corporate worship is a vehicle for the common praise and prayer of the entire worshiping assembly. The church is a community gathered by the Spirit and convinced that Jesus Christ is in its midst

as his Word is preached and as the sacraments are celebrated and shared in the mutual conversation and song of the faithful. In a very practical sense, music is the glue that helps hold together the action of the liturgy, that gives it more discernable shape and form, and that projects in a unique way its varying moods and emphases. Music is a uniting force when it helps the Christian community focus its attention where it belongs—on Christ and what he has done for us. Music becomes a dividing force when its focus is on lesser or secondary concerns—on musicians as performers, or on the congregation as a group to be entertained or manipulated.

Music for the *common* praise and prayer of the community involves both the music the congregation actually sings, as well as—for want of a better term—the art music of choir and organ. As to congregational song, be it settings of the liturgy, hymnody, or psalmody, music for the congregation must, on the one hand, be capable of being sung. But, on the other hand, congregations are generally more capable musically than we tend to think or to give them credit for. To be sure, music exists in worship not for the sake of the musicians, but for the sake of the people; at the same time to affirm that music in worship is for the sake of the people does not imply a license or an excuse for the perpetuation of inately simplistic music just because it is supposedly “singable” by a congregation. One goal of a good congregational melody—whether liturgical or hymnic—is to help stretch the congregation beyond what they thought might be possible, and in so doing help them to achieve and embrace a richness and depth of Christian experience and expression they never thought possible. Successful settings of the liturgy, hymnody, and psalmody do just that.

The music of so many “new” liturgies seems to perpetuate the notion that congregations are incapable of anything beyond the simplest and most boring snippets of melody. On the other hand, some musical settings seem to suggest that the composer has had little ongoing contact with singing congregations and has written choir or concert music in which the congregation is assigned a role, but, because of its complexity, has little chance of achieving successful participation. Exactly where one draws the line between the inately simplistic and stretching people too far is a matter of experience and informed judgment. But that is part of the task of the church musician, part of his stewardship, and those whose eyes are focused on the common prayer of the people will be on the way to making the right judgments.

The church musician is a responsible steward of the mysteries when he understands that music in the Lutheran tradition finds its most comfortable home in the liturgy. It is in the liturgy in all its richness and fullness that God’s people can best express their common worship and praise. For Luther, certainly, and for Lutherans at their best, music in worship is liturgical song. The church musician understands that it is the liturgy—that living tradition of praise, proclamation, prayer, and mutual edification—that disciplines our use of music and best determines how it is used in worship and for specific occasions.

For organists this means giving greater attention to playing the liturgy and hymnody with care and confidence in order that the people might sing with greater understanding, vitality, and enthusiasm. For choirs it means giving primary attention to psalmody, hymnody, responses, verses and offertories, Gospel motets, music to enrich congregational singing, and less attention to so-called "special music," which generally interrupts and intrudes into the liturgy. For this to happen where presently it does not will necessitate a dramatic change of attitudes and priorities—first of all, perhaps, a change of attitudes and priorities in the thinking of many church musicians who sometimes come with other agendas, and certainly a change of attitudes and priorities among pastors and congregations where they have come to expect music in worship to serve a variety of other concerns. Patiently and winsomely helping that change to occur is part of the faithful stewardship of the church musician.

As the sixteenth-century church of the Reformation dealt with the matter of the relationship between congregational song and art music in worship, it found a middle way. The Lutheran church was the heir of a western Catholic tradition, which had placed great emphasis on art music and had little, if any, place for simple congregational song. It also existed in the midst of a developing Reformed tradition, which placed great emphasis on simple congregational song and had essentially no place for art music of any kind. Luther's genius was to welcome both—simple congregational song and art music of the most sophisticated kind—to the liturgy, and to unite them on the basis of the Lutheran chorale, the people's song of the Reformation, which provided the link and was the unifying factor in so much of the music that flourished in the centuries following the Reformation. Here was music for the liturgy, which provided opportunity for participation by people at every level of their ability: congregation, choir, organist, instrumentalist, composer.

This uniting of simple congregational song and art music was not simply a practical solution to an immediate problem. Rather, it was a practice that emerged from a distinctive theological understanding of music as gift, music as doxological proclamation and praise, music as liturgical song, and music as the song of royal priests, as those ideas worked out their way in the regular worship of God's people. A confessional faith does not simply result in generalized abstractions as it deals with matters of worship; rather, it has practical ramifications in terms of what we do when we worship. A closer acquaintance with our rich musical heritage and practice as Lutherans might well help guide church musicians today through the treacherous waters of contemporary church life and musical practice where the luring calls of contemporary Loreleis too frequently lead only to liturgical and musical shipwreck.

The church musician is a responsible steward of the mysteries when she understands that God is praised and people are edified when the Word is proclaimed through texts, which speak the Gospel clearly and distinctly,

and through music, which in its honesty, integrity, and craftsmanship, reflects that same Gospel. Not to care enough about what is sung is to neglect the Church's concern for music as *viva vox evangelii*, as the "living voice of the Gospel." Not to care enough about the musical vehicle for that proclamation and praise is to forget that music is God's gift to us to be used to the best of our ability in his praise and for his glory. Our common praise demands uncommon musical vehicles. Uncommon musical vehicles must not to be confused or equated with either complexity or difficulty. The truly great songs of the church share traits that make them simultaneously uncommon and truly popular: texts that speak of the heart of our faith, and music that reflects the character of faith in its simplicity, directness, suitability to its function, and in its careful craftsmanship.

The church musician's task is two-fold. She must help people to see the difference between texts that speak the Gospel clearly and distinctively, and those that blur its witness. And she must also help people see the difference between music that reflects the character of the Gospel in the honesty and integrity of its craftsmanship, and music that is too ready to sacrifice those characteristics for other more immediate goals.

For a church musician to see no significant theological difference between such a rich text as Jaroslav Vajda's "Christ Goes Before" and "I have decided to be a Christian," a blatant contradiction of Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Creed in his Small Catechism, is to avoid the first of these two tasks. For church musicians to suggest that there is no real musical difference between, for example, *Sine Nomine* and many of this week's favorites in the "contemporary Christian music" category is to avoid the second task and indulge in our own kind of musical deconstruction, which ultimately concludes that there are no objective standards at all. This is not to set up a false choice between a populist view and an elitist view, between music for its own sake and music for the people's sake; rather, it is a concern for music and words for the Gospel's sake.

We live in a time when an unprecedented number of new texts, both liturgical and hymnic, are being written and are readily and easily available for congregational use. Many such texts come out of traditions or have developed from causes with presuppositions often at variance with confessional Lutheranism, and in some cases, with the stance of historic Christianity. In some cases their authors are among the most heralded in our day. Where texts are in fact at variance with the historic faith of the Church, the church musician must be ready to say clearly and forthrightly that—despite their popularity or their politically correct stance—such texts are wanting, that the emperor, so to speak, has no clothes. To see—and help others to see—that some texts speak the Gospel clearly and distinctly, and that others blur its witness, is part of the stewardship of the church musician.

But there must also be a concern for the music of worship. Not every piece of "religious" music may be suitable for use in the liturgy. Here it is the liturgy that must discipline our choices and ultimately determine use

and suitability. Where church musicians begin to make a distinction between generally “religious music” and music for liturgical worship, repertoires (in many situations) and congregational expectations will necessarily have to change.

This generation has also seen the emergence of a large number of church musicians who see as part of their vocation the composing of new music for worship. This has been a tremendous blessing for the church, and the church has been greatly enriched through their efforts. But it is also incumbent on those who are so talented to remind themselves of the dangers and pitfalls to which all of us who write music for the church are susceptible. The lack of attention to the study of one’s craft, the striving for the easy effect, the subtle notion that piety can somehow substitute for competence, or that cleverness and flair can replace mastery and skill—all these are very real temptations for young or old composers for the church. Artistic morality presupposes skill at one’s craft, but it also involves being worthy of one’s heritage by both nurturing it and by extending it through the creation of music of commensurate emotional and intellectual rigor.

One more thing needs to be said, and that involves the crucial relationship between church musicians and the pastors. No one has said it better than A.R. Kretzmann, who some years ago reminded us all that doxology is the name of the game, and that “If we (pastors and church musicians) are to rise to the heights of a common doxology, we must rise together,”⁶ because it is in the corporate worship of the assembly that we share a ministry of proclamation, praise, and nurture centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Against the common notion that the work of the church musician is simply that of a “hired hand,” Kretzmann speaks clearly and forthrightly:

The “whole” man is redeemed by Jesus Christ and the “whole” man responds to the message. The two media, preaching and music, are thus not only culturally and aesthetically involved, but they have a proclaiming and theological dimension which can hardly be estimated unless we have fallen prey to the popular but erroneous feeling that the “spoken” Word is *the thing*.⁷

Such an understanding, he reminds us, ought to draw pastors and church musicians together in dialog and understanding as nothing else can. It is the same Gospel that should sound out with equal clarity from both pulpit and choir loft, from both the chancel and the organ. There is no need to expand the distance that often is found between pulpit and choirloft into a great impassable gulf. Where this happens, Kretzmann advises us, search for the reason. “Who has forgotten the Gospel, and why has it happened? Can you explain moods and temperaments in the light of the cross? Has the congregation come to expect tensions born of pride? Why should there be pride when the only interest is the glory of God?”⁸ The list of questions could go on.

One could speak no better words in conclusion than those of Austin Fleming, who has caught the spirit of the church musician as steward of

the mysteries better than anyone. Speaking directly to the church musician, he reminds each of us that:

- Yours is a share in the work of the Lord's Spirit who draws us together into one, who makes harmony out of discord, who sings in our hearts the lyric of all that is holy.
- Yours is the joy of sounding that first note which brings the assembly to its feet ready to praise God.
- Yours is none other than the Lord's song; you draw us into that canticle of divine praise sung throughout the ages in the halls of heaven.
- You help us respond to God's word, to acclaim the gospel; to sing of our salvation in Christ.
- Yours is a ministry that gathers our many voices into one grand choir of praise.
- Come to your work from your personal prayer.
- Let your rehearsals begin with prayer in common, let your practice be marked by unanimity in spirit and in ideals.
- Be gentle in correcting one another: the kingdom will not fall on a flatted note.
- Open the choir to those whom the Lord has blessed with musical gift; help the not so gifted to discern the talents that are theirs.
- Take care to study the scriptures for the liturgy in which you will serve; know well the word that calls forth our praise.
- Let the lyrics of your songs be strong, true, and rooted in the scriptures; those who sing the Lord's word sing the Lord's song.
- Make no room for the trite, the maudlin, the sentimental.
- Open your hearts and voices to new songs worthy of God's people at prayer.
- Let your repertoire change as all living things must, but not so much that the song of God's people is lost.
- Be ambitious for the higher gifts, but not beyond your gifts; respect the range of talent the Lord has given you and your community.
- Let your music be always the servant of the Lord, of God's people, of the divine service they offer.
- Let the service of your music always complement but never overshadow the people's prayer.
- Let your performance become a prayer, and your art a gift.
- Let technique become no idol, but simply a tool for honing the beauty of your gift. Remember that your ministry is ever an emptying out of yourself; when the solo is assigned to another, let that singer's offering become your prayer.
- When no one comments on the new motet, be thankful that your work led the people to God and not to you.
- Waste no time wondering, "Do you think they like it?" but ask at all times, "Did it help them and all of us to pray?"
- When your ministry leads you to music, it has led you astray.
- When your ministry leads you to the Lord, it has brought you home.
- When your brothers and sisters thank and praise you for your work, take delight in the song their prayer has become, and rejoice in the work the Lord has accomplished through you.
- Be faithful in the work you do, for through it the Lord saves his people.⁹

notes

¹ Sir Humphrey Appleby, K.C.B. *Yes, Prime Minister*. Sidney & Auckland: Doubleday, 1988, entry for 10 January.

² "Dead End for the Mainline?" *Newsweek*. 9 August 1993: 48.

³ Ewald M. Plass. *What Luther Says*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959: 980.

⁴ 1 Chronicles 15:22

⁵ "Preface to the Babst Hymnal" (1545). *Luther's Works* 53:333.

⁶ A.R. Kretzmann. "The Pastor and Church Musician: A Constant Doxology." *Church Music* 70.2:8-11.

⁷ *Ibid.* p.8.

⁸ *Ibid.* p.9.

⁹ Austin Fleming. *Yours is a Share: The Call of Liturgical Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1985:16-20.